

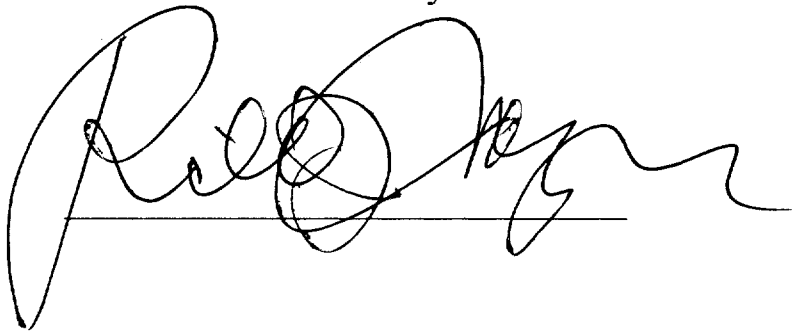
# The Middletown Baha'is

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Michael B. Gray

Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Richie Meyer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richie Meyer', is written over a horizontal line.

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003

Expected Date of Graduation  
May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003

## Abstract

After being a part of the Muncie Baha'i community for the last four years, the director attempted to step outside and analyze the environment he was living in through a documentary film. What started as a quest for defining the "averageness" of the Middletown Bahá'ís turned into something else. The director uses a profile of the religious community and their beliefs in unity to examine the community's opinion of itself. Through an inquiry into the labeling of the Bahá'í community, he found what the Bahá'ís considered to be important. Realizing that average cannot be easily defined, correlations between representations of the community compared to the American believers were made. The viewer is allowed to see the community portrayed from the believers' point of view, and draw their own conclusions on the state of the Bahá'ís in Muncie.

## Acknowledgements

- I would like to thank my Honors advisor Dr. Richie Meyer for his inspiration and direction. His passion for film is contagious.
- My parents, whose continuous support provides me with an ability to attempt any project.
- My peers who helped to create this project with a couple days of excellent camera work: Grant Connell and Katherine Wuertz.
- The Muncie Bahá'í community and all who allowed me to attend events while filming. Without their approval and interest this would not have been possible.

Michael Gray  
Honors 499  
“The Middletown Bahá’is”

During the past semester I created my first documentary film. I set out to find out more about my local religious community, and ended up learning much more than I expected. I tried to include various methods within the research of my topic, and I feel I now know much more about documentary filmmaking. My goal was to see if the label that Muncie, Indiana has acquired as “Middletown,” a town that is representative of much of America, applies to my local religious community, the Bahá’is of Muncie.

I began by researching the origins of the Middletown studies. I realized quickly that there were countless studies relating to life in Middletown, and that the first study was intended to be focused on religion. Robert Lynd had a degree in theology before his success in sociology. There are numerous works relating to religion in Muncie, but most seem to come from a secular and non-specific viewpoint. *The Middletown Jews* was very interesting, as the oral histories of many Jews in Muncie were described and recorded. Caplow’s book (*All Faithful People*) was interesting as well, but it wasn’t what I was looking for. It was easy to see there was a wealth of information, and I decided I would like to do something different to try to add to the field of study. There was little information on the Bahá’í society as a whole available to me, so I visited their National Archives. I found some interesting tidbits of information on Muncie, but only bits and pieces of evidence at first. After I spent some time on the local Bahá’í newsletters, I was able to get a basic understanding of the history of the community. The first organized community was thirty years ago, and the group has been quite consistent since. In a simple comparison of statistics it appears that the Muncie community of Bahá’is grew

just as the Bahá'í Faith did in America during the 1960's and 1970's. There was a large amount of growth, but then a surprising return to slower and consistent numbers. As I was able to make a few connections with Muncie and American Bahá'ís, I realized that the real strength of my film would not be in interesting numbers. Because I was portraying the community interactions, I should focus on the activities that are a part of the group, with an emphasis on the Bahá'ís themselves. *The Middletown Jews* focused more on the actual Jewish people of the community, and with this idea I approached my film differently. I realize that relatively few people know about the basic facts of the Bahá'í Faith, so I planned on using material previously created by Bahá'í Media Services. After I had concluded a majority of my interviews with the Muncie Bahá'ís, I realized that I could attempt to let them describe their own beliefs and be effective. While I was able to draw some conclusions about the general American Bahá'í community from my research, I realized that the Bahá'ís themselves would be the focus of my film.

During my research into Middletown, I talked to Dr. Bruce Geelhoed, the Director for the Center of Middletown Studies. He reminded me that Muncie is viewed as “average,” when the real meaning is that it seems to be a representative community and not simply average. One of the strongest correlations I found in local Bahá'í newsletters were the concerns expressed about challenges Bahá'ís face. It seemed that the challenges the Bahá'ís of Muncie face represent the same obstacles as American Bahá'ís. Through interviews, I found that this was at least a common perception among the Muncie Bahá'ís.

During my course of study into the documentary, several filmmakers interested me. John Grierson and Robert Flaherty's works intrigued me, and I used parts of their

ideas for inspiration. I realized that I had been living within the Bahá'í community here for several years, and if I could stay somewhat objective I could take a type of anthropological view as well. Flaherty lived with his on camera subjects for long periods of time, and in this way seemed to gain a better understanding of his material. I decided that in order to best do a film about the Bahá'í community, I should record their community functions. These included their normal meetings every nineteen days, biweekly devotions, and occasional holy days. Through attending and recording these events, I felt I was able to grasp an idea of what community life was like in Muncie.

I attempted to film whenever there was community interaction, and I created a large amount of videotape. With my increasing amount of interest and ability to show the community members in their typical environment, I leaned more towards interviewing local Bahá'ís than some experts who could describe them. While I know that I wasn't going to be presenting a pure oral history, I thought that using the ideas and words of the Muncie Bahá'ís could be very interesting. I attempted to tell the story of the Muncie Bahá'ís mostly through their own viewpoints, with a background given about Middletown. With so much work on the subject, I thought that telling the story from the Bahá'ís view might be unique compared to a usual host or expert. I was concerned that I would not be able to tell a story without using voice over or a central host to guide the story along. Through editing I tried to create a cohesive story, and one that most accurately represented the community I was portraying. While I used several formalistic editing techniques, I decided to only use music that came from Bahá'í events. It is not necessarily the best music Bahá'ís have ever made, but I thought that it would add to the realism within the documentary. My lack of a budget also helped my initiative to use as

much original material as possible, but I believe that it could represent the community the best.

During my course of study of the Muncie Bahá'í community, my interests in their story changed. I alternated with different theories to approach their story, and I tried to use realistic ideals combined with an interesting formalistic form. Documentary work incorporates different areas of study and research, and I feel I was able to use many different approaches in the analysis of this community. While there are always improvements that can be made to my work, I feel that I was able to use what I have learned in the past few years and apply it to an exploration into my religious community through film.

## Sources

- Caplow, Theodore. All faithful people : change and continuity in Middletown's religion. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Flaherty, Robert. Nanook of the North **Home Vision, 1989.**
- Rottenberg, Dan ed. Middletown Jews : the tenuous survival of an American Jewish community. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1997
- Hampe, Barry. Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos. New York, Henry Holt. 1997
- Hampson, Arthur. "The Growth and Spread of the Baha'i Faith." Diss. University of Hawaii, 1980
- Hardy, Forsyth. Grierson on Documentary. New York, Praegar. 1966.
- Hoover, Dwight W. Middletown: The Making of a Documentary Film Series. Philadelphia, Hardwood. 1992.
- McMullen, Michael. The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity. New Jersey, Rutgers Univ. Press, 2000.
- Niss, Hamilton. ed. "Hoosier Headlines" May 1995
- Rosenthal, Alan. Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Southern Illinios Univ. Press, 2002.
- Satterfield, Ed. "International Day of Peace Proclaimed" Muncie Star 15 Sep. 1985
- Smith, Marilyn, ed. "Hoosier Headlines" April 1973.
- Ward-Schafer, Mary, ed. "Dawn Over the Heartland" June 1992.